United Nations E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/L.4

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: Limited
20 October 1997

Original: English

Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination

Nineteenth session
New York, 10-13 February 1998
Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

Demographic, social and migration statistics

Note by the Secretary-General

Population and housing censuses

1. At its twenty-ninth session, the Statistical Commission commended several aspects of the work undertaken by the Secretariat in preparing for the 2000 round of population and housing censuses. In particular, it appreciated the involvement of all regions in the expert group that was convened to review the first draft of the document. It endorsed the provisional principles and recommendations for population and housing censuses (PROV/ST/ESA/STAT/SER.M/67/Rev.1) that were submitted for its adoption, and welcomed the attention to user needs introduced for the first time in the final section of the recommendations. While requesting editorial revision and the inclusion of tabulation lists and descriptions in the published version, it requested that the principles and recommendations be published as quickly as possible in all languages.

2. As requested by the Statistical Commission, the principles and recommendations were revised and prepared for publication in English. Upon the completion of their publication in English, they will be published in all official languages of the United Nations. It is anticipated that all six versions will be available for use by Member States in the 2000 round of population and housing censuses during 1998.

3. The principles and recommendations completed by the Secretariat include additional revisions to part one, including the identification of strategic goals, and the adaptation of new technologies in conducting and processing the census and disseminating the results. The household as the unit of enumeration in both the population and housing census has also been clarified. In part two, the sections on the topics proposed for inclusion in a population census were revised as necessary. In particular, household and family characteristics have been revised to conform to recent changes in population structure and the need for policy-relevant information. Economic and educational characteristics have been revised in accordance with changes in classifications and the revisions in the System of National Accounts, 1993. International migration has been revised to adhere to the draft revised recommendations on statistics of international migration (PROV/ST/ESA/SER.M/58/Rev.1), and a new topic on disability has been elaborated. Topics for housing censuses contain revisions in (a) the classification of housing units to clarify the differences between standard, medium-standard, marginal and temporary housing units and (b) occupancy status, where (i) a revised classification of occupancy status has been introduced and (ii) a new topic on

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floor space has been introduced in order to identify information needed to measure overcrowding. Part three, a new addition to the principles and recommendations, provides assistance to users of census data in gaining access to census information, and more importantly, in influencing census planners to take their needs into account in planning the census; it also incorporates references to census-taking procedures, how census products are produced and how to ensure access to important products from the census.

4. Finally, as particularly requested by the expert group that met in September 1996, annexes containing illustrative tabulations for both population censuses and housing censuses are still included in the revised principles and recommendations. The Secretariat is reviewing the possibility of preparing a CD-Rom version of the principles and recommendations, and will report to the Working Group on the results of that review.

Civil registration and vital statistics

5. As indicated in the report of the Secretary-General on demographic, social and migration statistics (E/CN.3/1997/15 and Add.1-2), a programme financed in part by the United Nations Population Fund to accelerate the improvement of civil registration and vital statistics systems is to be completed in 1997. As part of that programme and for the benefit of countries trying to improve the timeliness and completeness of their vital statistics, five handbooks have been drafted in a series entitled *Handbooks on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*. The status of preparation of the individual handbooks is as follows:

(a) The third handbook in the series, *Handbook on Developing Information, Communication and Education for Effective Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*, was submitted for publication in September 1997;

(b) The first in the series, *Handbook on Management, Operation and Maintenance of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*, is also complete and is being reviewed. It will shortly be submitted for publication and translation into all six official languages of the United Nations;

(c) The second in the series, *Handbook on the Preparation of a Legal Framework for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*, has been prepared in Spanish, and will shortly be submitted for publication;

(d) The fifth in the series, *Policies and Protocols for Release and Archiving of Individual Records for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*, is also ready for publication;

(e) The fourth in the series, *Handbook on Computerization of Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems*, is available in draft form, and on completion of its review will be submitted for publication.

Migration statistics

6. At its twenty-ninth session, the Statistical Commission also adopted the above-mentioned draft revised recommendations on statistics of international migration, and agreed on a set of revisions that should be incorporated. The United Nations Population Division, which has collaborated with the Statistics Division in preparing those recommendations, is revising the recommendations, which will be submitted for publication in 1998.

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Addendum

Report on census costs

1. At the twenty-ninth session (New York, 10-14 February 1997), the Statistical Commission requested the United Nations Statistics Division to prepare a report on the costs of conducting a decennial census. The Statistics Commission requested that the report be prepared in collaboration with the regional commissions and be submitted upon completion to the Commission's Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, the regional commissions and the heads of national statistical offices.

2. There has been little systematic cross-national study of the costs of collecting statistics, particularly through censuses. The census operation involves numerous agencies (units) of Government, the private sector, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations at various administrative levels. Indeed, it is partly because census activities extend beyond the routine operations of a single unit of Government and involve the contribution of many organizations that the full costs of a census cannot be easily determined. Frequently, the major and most readily identifiable costs, such as cartography, field enumeration, training, data processing and publication of reports, are explicitly stated in the budget. However, other resources that are required for a census may be contained in the budgets of separate governmental units, or else may be covered in a budget prior to the census date without their role in the census being explicitly identified.

3. At the request of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-first session, the United Nations Statistics Division conducted a study of census procedures, costs and staffing among 138 selected countries that represented a wide range of census experiences as part of its activities in connection with the 1980 World Population and Housing Census Programme. The study was carried out by requesting that countries provide information on practices for estimating staff and other resource requirements for censuses. Among the 75 countries that responded to the request, a substantial number maintained records of census expenditure by type and stage of the census operations. However, there was no uniformity in record keeping, and in most instances countries were unable to classify their administrative records in ways that allowed them to answer the specific details requested in their inquiry. The review of country practices also suggested that

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single cost indicators, such as total census per capita, are subject to a host of limitations, which make it difficult to say that one census is more expensive than the other.

4. Subsequently, the Statistical Commission made the following comment at its twenty-sixth session:

> "With respect to methodological studies, the importance of undertaking a study of the cost of population and housing censuses at regional level was mentioned. Based on the previous experience of the Secretariat, such studies were complex and the results could easily be misinterpreted. That was due to the great variation among countries in the way censuses were carried out in terms of use of personnel and other resources of national, provincial and local government departments, as well as volunteer enumerators and contributions from private sector. Consequently, the total cost was difficult to obtain on a comparable basis across countries."[1]

5. The Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) prepared a study entitled *Costing Aspects of Population and Housing Censuses in Selected Countries in the UN/ECE Region*.[2] The report was prepared by a group of rapporteurs on costing aspects of population and housing censuses set up by the Conference of European Statisticians. The study attempted to compare the census costs of France, Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; it concluded that having collated the case studies, the group can only endorse the above-mentioned comment of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session on the difficulty of obtaining costs on a comparable basis across countries.

6. Rather than compare census costs among countries, the Secretariat suggests that a more useful approach to the study of census costs would be to provide guidance to countries on ways to accurately estimate census costs in a systematic manner. The Secretariat proposes that a report be prepared along those lines for the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session. The report would consist of descriptions of specific activities in the pre-enumeration, enumeration and post-enumeration phases, including specific elements that need to be considered in preparing a census budget and particular problems that may contribute to estimating costs.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1991, Supplement No. 5* (E/1991/25), para. 107.

[2] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.II.E.15.